

THE CULTURAL WORLD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Session 3: Patronage and Reciprocity

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Patronage, Reciprocity, Clientage, Benefaction, Grace, Faith, Brokerage, Seneca, Charis, Pistis

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. David DeSilva explores the fundamental social institution of patronage and the ethos of reciprocity that formed the bedrock of first-century Mediterranean culture. He contrasts modern, impersonal, and non-relational transactional systems with the ancient world's reliance on highly personal networks of mutual benefit, where patrons provided vital resources and clients returned loyalty, public honor, and material services. DeSilva demonstrates how these social dynamics were used to conceptualize relationships with deities, particularly within Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts, and how New Testament writers adopted everyday terms like grace (*charis*) and faith (*pistis*) to articulate theological concepts. Finally, he illustrates these concepts in action through the narrative of the Roman centurion in Luke 7, highlighting the interplay of patronage, brokerage, reciprocity, and faith.

Outline

I. Introduction to Patronage and Reciprocity

- A. Modern impersonal vs. ancient personal approaches to needs
 - 1. Modern reliance on commercial stores, banks, and commercial insurance
 - 2. Ancient reliance on personal relationships as the primary means of resource access
- B. Justice as the ethical anchor of giving and receiving favors
 - 1. Seneca's *On Benefits*: exchange of favors as the chief bond of human society
 - 2. Personal assistance as the structural glue of the ancient social fabric

II. The Dynamics of Patrons, Clients, and Brokers

- A. Roles and mutual obligations
 - 1. Patrons: provide vital material resources (money, grain, employment, land)
 - 2. Clients: accept the sacred obligation of gratitude, public testimony, and active loyalty
- B. Patronage as a political and social power base
 - 1. Collecting a vast clientele to increase personal prestige and power bases

2. Performing services as client's means of repaying unpayable material gifts

C. Brokerage and mediation

1. Definition of a broker: connecting a needy client to an elite, greater patron
2. Classic dramatic example: Creon in Sophocles' Oedipus the King
3. Historical Roman examples: Pliny's letters and his role mediating access to Emperor Trajan

III. Social Horizons of Patronage and Reciprocity

A. Friendship as patronage between social equals

1. Equal status equals mutual exchange of favors without structural clientage
2. Historical example: Pilate and Herod Antipas becoming political friends

B. Peer-to-peer reciprocity among the rural agrarian class

1. Hesiod's Works and Days: advice on fair measure and neighborly mutual aid
2. Critical social consequences of failing to return a favor in peasant networks

C. Public benefaction vs. personal patronage

1. Public benefaction: civic gifts (temples, games, fountains) given to the city in general
2. Personal patronage: highly specific, one-on-one relationships establishing long-term, cross-generational duties

IV. Patronage and the Divine Realm

A. Modeling human relationships with God/gods after patron-client dynamics

1. Deities as the supreme, all-powerful benefactors
2. Priesthood as brokerage (the Latin pontifex meaning literally "bridge-maker")

B. Deification and the Roman Emperor Cult

1. Elite generals and imperial rulers treated as divine patrons in response to liberations
2. Athenian civic worship and prayers of gratitude to General Demetrius Poliorcetes
3. Civic cult of Augustus as a response of gratitude for restoring regional peace and prosperity

C. Reassessing ancient religious motivation

1. Distinguishing *do ut des* ("I give so that you may give") from *do quia dedisti* ("I give because you have given")
2. Reciprocal thanksgiving as the core driving force of both Greco-Roman and Jewish religion

V. The Social Context of Grace (Charis)

A. Everyday origin of theological vocabulary

1. Grace as a household, secular term before becoming a specialized religious concept

B. The four distinct meanings of Charis in the first century

1. Aesthetic beauty, poise, charm, or a natural gift
2. The favorable disposition/willingness of a giver to bestow a benefit
3. The actual material gift, assistance, or favor conferred
4. The gratitude, thanks, or response of acknowledgment returned by the recipient

C. The opposite of grace: Acharistia (ingratitude or failure to return favor)

D. The continuous cycle of the Three Graces

1. Ubiquitous artistic representations across the Mediterranean (frescoes, mosaics)
2. Seneca's exegesis: three nymphs dancing hand-in-hand representing giving, receiving, and returning benefits
3. Ingratitude viewed as equivalent to sacrilege in a society lacking institutional safety nets

VI. Exegetical Implications for the New Testament

A. Grounding theological texts in cultural expectations

1. Reading Galatians and Hebrews through the lens of ancient reciprocity
2. Challenging and correcting community dynamics (e.g., wealthy patrons trying to buy influence in Corinth)

B. Everyday vocabulary of giving and receiving

1. Virtuous giving: giving in the sole interest of the recipient, not personal investment
2. Recipient selection: choosing people with a reputation for gratitude (the ancient credit rating)
3. Giving in imitation of the gods: Seneca and Jesus (Matthew 5) on being lavish to the ungrateful

VII. Reciprocity and the Vocabulary of Faith (Pistis)

A. Everyday social home of faith and loyalty

1. Pistis as trust in a patron's reliability or a client's dependability
2. Apistia (distrust or disloyalty) as failure to maintain trust or keep faith in a relationship

VIII. Case Study: The Centurion's Servant (Luke 7:1-10)

A. Key characters and their social positions

1. Centurion: a Roman outsider needing healing for a beloved household servant
2. Jesus: possessing the reputation and power to perform divine wonderworking

B. Brokerage and reciprocity in action

1. The Jewish elders as brokers pleading the centurion's worthiness based on his local patronage (building the synagogue)
2. The Capernaum elders fulfilling their client obligations to their Roman benefactor

C. The centurion's expression of Pistis

1. Sending friends to declare his unworthiness to host Jesus directly under his roof
2. Demonstrating a clear understanding of spiritual authority and absolute trust in Jesus' word
3. Jesus' commendation of the centurion's faith as unmatched even in Israel